

**Sermon: Be Humbled**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Matthew 23:1-12**

Like most books in the Bible, the Gospels were meant to be heard by a local audience. Only much later were they written down. And now, here we are, trying to find our way through them.

From the way Jesus treated the Pharisees, Matthew's congregation of Jewish Christians, it would seem, were no longer in communion with Pharisee-led Judaism in the years following the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. With that in mind, it may be that what Jesus says in this chapter may have come from Matthew alone.

But – as this is the Gospel we have, it might not matter who said or wrote what, when, and for whom.

Also, everything we know about Jesus has come down to us from someone other than Jesus himself. What we know about him and his ministry we have been taught, and we accept those teachings as God's Word, even if their meaning is sometimes obscure.

Having said all that, did you notice in today's reading that the Pharisees, chief priests and elders, Sadducees, and the lawyer have all left the scene? After challenging Jesus repeatedly, they finally have no more questions for him. Jesus is left to speak with only the (Jewish) crowds and the (Christ-following) disciples, so to them he lays out his critique of the Pharisees. In fact, the rest of chapter 23 is full of woes directed specifically at the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.

The word *Pharisee* means 'separatist' and it stems from the Maccabean revolt about two hundred years earlier. By the first century, Pharisees were lay leaders who cared deeply for Torah law. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee. Jesus himself was said to be one and, here, he honors their authority to teach. So why was he so hard on them?

To begin with, Jesus tells us that they really didn't practice what they taught, and that lack of integrity threatened their relevance to the community.

Secondly, teachers have a lot of influence over their students. But that influence can be toxic if exerted poorly. As Jesus said, the Pharisees put heavy burdens on the shoulders of others without being willing to carry these burdens themselves.

And their egos got in the way: ‘they love to have the place of honor;’ they love titles like *Rabbi*; they want to be seen by others while they pray in the Temple; they want *respect*, like some ancient Fredo Corleone.

Years ago, Judith Patt, the pastor at Promise Church in Weymouth, said that ‘Jesus speaks against the establishment, against being part of the institution, because the leaders have become interested in their own egos being satisfied rather than in following their own teachings.’ She also said to remember that we have one teacher, and that following God is a life of humility, not of selfish pride and gain.

The good news here is, Jesus leads by example. He didn’t teach as the Pharisees did; he’s a humble watch-and-learn kind of teacher: we see what he does, and his actions become the lesson. A few chapters back, Jesus said,

‘Come to me; [...] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; [...] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:28-30).

In Matthew’s world, the hypocrites trade God’s quiet and often silent approval for the louder, more obvious but less meaningful praise of the people. Matthew may not like the Pharisees, but he also wants to cultivate leaders who will imitate Jesus.

In professional sports, the players play not only for the love of the game and for huge paychecks, but also for the chance to play on a big stage, to be seen by thousands every time they step on the field, or the court, or the ice, to hear the adulation of their fans. Humility is not always evident in a packed football stadium.

Sports are supposed to be fun. Celebrating is part of any game. It may even be impossible to play at a high level in any sport unless you have an ego the size of a house. And, as Larry Bird once said, ‘It ain’t bragging if you can back it up.’

That’s a light-hearted example. We don’t care if the players are humble or not.

But we should condemn religious hypocrisy, the abuse of power, and the failure to help the weak and marginalized members of our communities; all the things that human authorities are prone to do. Over and over, those in authority often pile up burdens on the people they claim to serve when they ought to help them carry a lighter load, which is why Jesus was always poking at the Pharisees to do their job.

In my house, we – the royal *we* – like to say that I’m handsome and humble. Clearly, we are joking. But is the Pharisee’s hubris a sin, or just posing?

Augustine, for one, called pride a sin. He said:

‘Pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God’s rule’ (*City of God* 19.12).

He said, ‘To possess my God, the humble Jesus, I was not yet humble enough. I did not know what his weakness was meant to teach’ (*Confessions*, VII, 18). And, so, he turned to the Gospels and the apostles’ letters to find out.

We find the sin of pride most often among the powerful, while the weak and oppressed sin when they turn away from God and neighbor. So, maybe we can define sin as the breaking of relationship both with God and with people. How do you fix that?

In both cases, we think through repentance and forgiveness by God’s grace.

We are all children of the same God, and we are all students of the same teacher. Each of us have our strengths and abilities, and we are all equal in God’s eyes, but that equality insists that the proud be humble and the weak lifted up.

We each have a role to play and gifts to give in God’s kingdom. But to live a life worthy of God, it must be lived with a total commitment to and complete faith in God, and with an actual and sincere willingness to be humble and to serve others.

This is the good news and the larger hope carried in the Bible as a whole.

Amen.

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